



## POETRY AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY: A STUDY OF SELECT POEMS OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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### ABSTRACT



Jayanta Mahapatra, a contemporary of A.K. Ramanujam, Nizzim Ezekeil and R. Parthasarathy stands out distinctly as a great Indian poet, in the domain of contemporary Indo-Anglican poetry. The poetry of Mahapatra describes what he sees around him. His creative mind changes the incidents into poetry. He comments on the social behaviour of people and the issues which affect them. While dealing with socio-cultural and political issues, he does not sacrifice the artistic quality. Yet, he is more concerned with the survival of man rather than creating a utopian world for the people. His characters are cobbler, hungry street children, slum dwellers, prostitutes and a woman in pain. Like the English Romantics, Mahapatra anchors his poetry in the sights sounds, and experiences of ordinary life and ordinary man. He portrays the people of Orissa and their Hindu religion with all its rituals and beliefs of the ancestors at the same time. Similarly, he embraces the genre of poetry because of its exploratory nature and beautiful rhyme structure.

**Keywords:** *Mahapatra, Indian Poet, Post Independent Poetry, Indianness, Contemporary reality, hunger, Women sufferers, Social inequalities.*

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Literature has been the means of giving form and utterance to the hopes and despairs, the enthusiasm and apathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain, in a nation's history as it moves from freedom to Slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and again from independence to the tasks of reconstruction involving further experiences of success and elation or futility and failure.

(Indian Writing in English 694)

Indian English poetry can be divided into two phases; before and after Independence. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, poetry was the dominant form in English writing and the Indian poets imitated the British Romantic and Victorian poets in form and theme. After the Independence, Indian English poetry began to acquire a distinct place in Indian Literature through greater innovations and creativity. It slowly acquired a distinct character and discovered its own path. At present, there are many writers who write only in English. In *Indian English Poetry Today*, Pritish Nandy declares "English is a language of our own, yes, an Indian language, in which we can feel deeply, create and convey experiences and responses typically Indian" (8).

Post-Independence Indian English Poetry cannot be the same as Pre-Independence Poetry. But surely, it has to be a continuation of it. In Indian English poetry after the Independence, some poets started expressing their sense of loss and hopelessness, or a future-oriented vision, associated with a desire to transform India. Some poets simply have either turned inward, a sort of introspection or indulged in an ironic observation of reality. Post-Independence Indian English poetry tried hard to find its path and develop its own artistic credo. It successfully rose above the imitation of English Romanticism and in the hands of brilliant poets as Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy, and Jayanta Mahapatra acquired new dimensions. Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar and Kamala Das turned inward to get into their roots. R. Parthasarathy, in "Home coming" the third part of the Rough Passage asked the Indian English Poets:

How long can foreign poets  
Provide the staple of your lines?

Turn inward, scrape the bottom of your  
past. (Rough Passage 2)

Parthasarathy, Kolatkar and Ramanujan tried to evoke a sense of their past and inherit the native traditions. Kamala Das too wrote freely about her emotional and sexual traumas in her poems. Nissim Ezekiel, Keki N. Daruwalla, Margaret Chatterjee and Lila Ray, who were unable to share the native tradition, took a different attitude; stoic and ironic. These Indian English poets attempted and succeeded in creating a new Indo-English idiom. Though Indian English poetry has come out of the Victorian English poetry standards, the quest for the native tradition and culture seems to be a major pre-occupation with them. But this element of "Indianness" without any trace of the influence of Victorian English poets set the Post-Independence Indian English poetry apart from the Pre-Independence period English Poetry.

Jayanta Mahapatra, a contemporary of A.K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel and R. Parthasarathy stands out distinctly as a great Indian poet, in the domain of contemporary Indo-Anglican poetry. He was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1923 in Cuttack, Orissa. He was born in a lower middle-class family. He had his early education in English medium at Stewart school, Cuttack. His post graduation was in Physics and he joined as a teacher in 1949 and worked in different Government colleges of Orissa. Though Mahapatra was born in a Christian family; he was surrounded by Hindu neighbours. He began writing poems rather late in his life.

The publication of his first book of poems, *Svayamvara and Other Poems*, in 1971 was followed by the publication of *Close the Sky Ten by Ten*. He has written seventeen volumes of poetry that include, *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting, Dispossessed Nests* (1986), *Selected Poems* (1987), *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988), *Temple* (1989), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992), *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2000) and *Random Descent* (2005). He received the prestigious Jacob Latstein Memorial Award in 1975. He has the great honour of being the first Indian English poet to receive Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 1981 for his long poem *Relationship*. He has bagged the prestigious SAARC literary Award for the year 2009. He is also the recipient of Alen Tate



Prize from *The Sewanee Review*, Sewanee, The University of the South, for his poems published in it in 2009. Jayanta Mahapatra was awarded an honorary doctorate by Ravenshaw University. The most coveted and prestigious "Padmashree Award" for civilian citizen was also awarded to him for his outstanding contribution in the field of literature. Mahapatra is also a distinguished editor and has been bringing out, for many years, a literary magazine, Chandrabhaga, from Cuttack. The magazine is named after Chandrabhaga, a prominent river in Orissa. His poetry even now receives much accolades from poets, critics, and reviewers.

Jayanta Mahapatra has contributed to Indian-English poetry within a short span of time. Mahapatra was also part of the trio of poets who laid the foundations of Indian English Poetry. He shared a special bond with A. K. Ramanujan, one of the finest poets in the Indian English poetry tradition. Mahapatra is also different in not being a product of the Bombay school of poets. He writes: "More than twenty years ago, when I first started writing poetry I decided to test my powers at poetry by sending the poems out to various periodicals. At that time frankly, I knew very little about poetry, my knowledge of the subject being limited to a few poems of Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth that had been incorporated in our school literature texts. To me this was a severe test, because the act of writing a poem was totally unknown to me." (Bombay literary review 5)

The poetry of Mahapatra describes what he sees around him. They are temples, beaches and the crowded streets of Orissa. His poetic world does not reproduce the incidents that influenced him. His creative mind changes the incidents into poetry. He supplies the aesthetic pleasure as well as the social behaviour of people and the issues which affect them. While dealing with socio-cultural and political issues, he does not sacrifice the artistic quality. Yet, he is more concerned with the survival of man rather than creating a utopian world for the people. His characters are cobbler, hungry street children, slum dwellers, prostitutes and a woman in pain. Like the English Romantics, Mahapatra anchors his poetry in the sights sounds, and experiences of ordinary life and ordinary man. He portrays the people of Orissa

and their Hindu religion with all its rituals and beliefs of the ancestors at the same time. Similarly, he embraced the genre of poetry because of his exploratory nature and beautiful rhyme structure. His own notion of poetry is thus:

I started writing poetry late...when I began, I suppose I was more carried away by what the English language could do; I was so much obsessed by the feel for words, their sound qualities. It was a wrong thing perhaps, this craze for English language and hence my first poems were in a way attempts in which the language left the ideas of the poems behind them, lost in the depths of words. But as the years went by, and I went on to publish more, finding out what my contemporaries in other countries were writing, my notions of poetry kept changing...The poems, the poetry remain exploratory, as I try to find out the person within myself, as I try to face this stranger that comes out of my poetry (The Poetry of Jayanta 33).

Mahapatra deals with variety of themes ranging from nature to death. His early poems deal with the themes like the nature of his childhood, his relationship with his father, his aloofness from the Hindu tradition, personal longings, infatuation, love towards women. His poetry is deeply rooted in Indian heritage. In the next phase, he is more concerned with the problems of the people and the contemporary reality, myth, ritual and cultural background. Whatever may be the theme, his sensibility is absolutely Indian. He captures the scenes around him and pens in his poems.

The poet expresses his intimacy with his hometown and its landscape. Though Orissa is endowed with rich natural resources, it becomes necessary for him to examine the poverty scenario and living condition of the people of Orissa. The poet can see the poor families going from door to door, begging for food. Orissa seems to have a large number of destitute who lack either money or material to survive. The poet feels sorry for the sad state of affairs in his state and he indirectly indicts the government's negligent attitude in resuming the good standards of living condition of the people.

In another Poem "Dawn at Puri", he writes about Puri, the holy town of Orissa situated on the coastal area. The town is throbbing with religious



fervour. It is not a holy place but it is the centre of Oriyan culture with the temple of Jagannath. It is well known for its religious features, particularly the annual festival held to honour the deity, Jagannath. The poet ruminates on the beach premises at Puri. The endless cawing of crows catches the poet's attention at the outset. He then notices a skull on the beach where bodies are normally cremated. The skull is a part of a cremation that has not been completely burnt by the funeral pyre:

Endless crow noises,  
A skull on the holy sands  
Tilts its empty country towards hunger  
(Paniker 113)

This skull is the symbol of the poverty and spiritual handicap of Puri, in spite of all the religious associations and connotations. The skull represents the hollowness of life and the inevitability of death. It symbolises the spiritual inactivity and pseudo-existence of Orissa. Puri here, functions as a miniature representation of India. The term 'empty country' emphasises the rejection of established social conventions. The hollow skull points to the irrational superstitions which would probably take man to cave age. The poet then notices a number of widows adorning white saris ready to perform the customary rites and rituals. These women are depicted as "past the centre of their lives". They have crossed away a significant portion of their lives, indicating that they have become old. The word "centre" may point to their spouses who were then the centre of their lives, are dead now. They appear serene and solemn. There appears an expression of austerity in their eyes, as they are quite aloof from all worldly concerns. The white color that they adorn is a symbol of their purity and tranquility. They are like living things caught in a net. The widows too have nothing more to forgo, as they stand in spiritual submission. The force that anchors these women to be steady in their approach to life is their undeterred faith in God. As they stand in a group, their uniting factor seems to be their timidity. They are a "mass of crouched faces" possessing no individuality. Women are demoted in a patriarchal society and this discrepancy is more pronounced, if she is a widow.

The frail early light catches  
Ruined, leprous shells leaning against one

another

A mass of crowded faces without names

(Paniker 113)

At the break of dawn, when the poet looks at the single funereal pyre burning, he is suddenly reminded of his mother's last wish. The phrase, "And suddenly breaks out from my hide" echoes the thought springing out; just as the poet sprung out from his mother's womb. His aged mother expressed her wish that she should be cremated at this particular place. Rites and rituals are necessary for a man belonging to a society. However, performing one's mother's last wish is far more important than these obligatory rites of religion and doctrines of custom. The realisation occurs to him on all of a sudden. The symbol of Dawn is thus also the realisation of the poet.

In his second volume "Swayamvara and other poems", he writes about ordinary people whom one comes across on the streets. Even characters like a singer in the train become the central character in the poem "A blind singer in the train". Everyday, the singer sings in the train with a hope of earning their livelihood. The poet pities thus:

Between successive halts of the guzzling  
train, this bamboo-stabled man, rooted  
this night, flutters stone wings as he faces  
the clash of silver, the prim dawn-light  
rushing past his pox-hollowed eyes.  
the academic ones walk to his calculated  
steps across the packed box, hear the faded  
stick's tap of hope in the daily functions of  
spider- flesh. Together they induce a spirit  
(Swayamvara 5)

The poem "Summer" illustrates Mahapatra's authentic Indian sensibility. Mahapatra sees the world with detachment, comprehends the reality that he encounters in the world, and portrays it objectively. The poet beautifully brings an order in his experience through peculiar evocation of images. This poem offers a few pictures which are by no means interconnected, and it reads like a riddle. But the pictures are vivid and realistic.

Not yet.

Under the mango tree  
The cold ash of a deserted fire.  
Who needs the future?



A ten-year-old girl  
combs her mother's hair,  
where crows of rivalries  
are quietly nesting.

The home will never  
be hers.

In a corner of her mind  
a living green mango  
drops softly to earth..(Rain of rites 14)

The words 'Not yet' focus on an event that will come after the current time. One needs to understand the poem to find out what is not yet to take place, or to happen, or to be done. The poem expresses the poet's inability to find the mystery of life.

In the poem "The Morning—I" appears to be a commentary on the hopeless society. It is also a contrast between moment and eternity:

Things past, the world  
On an edge of pristine gold.  
Like a bird  
The sky turning through the clouds.

The sweeper-girl walking by  
the can of human excrement  
Cradled  
In her frail arm.

A window  
Is thrown open to the street.  
Some women's derisive look  
falls from the cool shadows.

And something spreads slowly  
Up in the houses:  
A dignity waiting  
To shape a birth they all can believe.

(Waiting 1)

As for his themes, Mahapatra seems to be obsessed with hunger, poverty, loneliness and a search for his identity and for roots. His attitude to Orissa, the place to which he belongs, is however, a matter of deep concern. In critical evaluations, he is usually described as a significant poet of Oriyan sensibility, but this is only partially true. As a matter of fact, Mahapatra's poems deal with intricacies of human relationships, social problems of Post—Independence phase, personal themes of love, sex,

sensuality, marriage and philosophical or cultural issues as well. Even, he is concerned with the hunger of the people.

'Hunger', according to Jayanta Mahapatra is an expression of his solitude. The speaker at the outset of the poem asserts that "the flesh was heavy on my back". He experiences an incredible urge for sexual satisfaction. He finds himself before a fisherman, who is willing to sell his daughter to satisfy the poet's hunger for sex. The fisherman puts forward the question 'carelessly', "Will you have her?" The father in order to meet his financial demand is ready to sell her daughter as if the girl is an item or commodity. The utter hopelessness in the life of the fisherman and his daughter is such that the words like sanctity would be meaningless there. The values cannot be traded in the life of the fisherman. Her individuality is relegated, and what she wants is not of significance. For, even a prostitute can have a customer that she wants. But the fisherman is "trailing his nets", callously to catch the poet for milking money. The symbolism is apparent as he is laying out a net for customers. The white bone seems to thrash the poet's eyes, as though his very inner wants to thrash out against his vision.

I followed him across the sprawling sands,  
my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.  
Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I  
lived in.

Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed  
at the froth his old nets had only dragged  
up from the seas.

The poet follows him across the extensive stretches of sand. His heart is throbbing rapidly. His skin is said to perform the function of a sling. That is, as a sling supports a fractured arm, the instinctive feelings of the skin helped fight back the apprehensions of the mind. Silence seems to consume his self, as though they tugs at his sleeves:

In the flickering dark his lean-to opened like  
a wound.

The wind was I, and the days and nights  
before.

Palm fronds scratched my skin. Inside the  
shack  
an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to  
those walls.



Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind. (Selected Poems 19)

The froth in the fisherman's net may be symbolic of the fact that wrongdoings may leave apparent traces behind. His lean body in the flickering dark appears like a wound. At that moment, the poet feels he is at his will, as free as the wind. The palm leaves scratches his skin, leaving marks of guilt. It signifies that all the hours are similar confined to the small shack. The space in his blank mind is filled with soot from the lamp. The fisher man says:

.... My daughter, she's just turned fifteen  
Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.

The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile. (Selected poems19)

He could comprehend the tricks that the father has employed to allure customers. He viewed this stock of tricks as exhausted because perhaps most of them were already used numerously to suit his needs. 'Fifteen' was supposed to be an age where the girl was fully grown and fresh in her beauty. Nevertheless the years felt like cold rubber owing to impoverished malnutrition. The poet sees the girl as an object- as a worm, thin and slimy perhaps, something that is revolting to him at the moment.

I felt the hunger there,  
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.

For the first time, the poet understood the real meaning of the word 'hunger', not owing to sexual displeasure but that driven by dismal poverty. The poet could feel the empty stomach as though the fish turns inside. The stanza explicitly reveals the loss of moral and social values of Orissa as well as of India. It provides a contrasting image of traditional Orissa – that is highly spiritual, ethical, and rich in cultural heritage.

In the poem "Slum" also, the poet articulates his empathy with the slum dwellers:

Your madness catches me:  
Scarred shacks, where nights begin,  
And full orange fires  
So dreadful on women's faces.

Only that I must summon courage to be in,

Spits of wind clawing at the flames  
that keep burning here, from the dark  
mirror  
resting on pain and plain despair

the familiar old whore on the road  
splits open in the sugary dusk,  
her tired breasts trailing me everywhere:  
Where the jackals find the rotting carcass

(A Rain of Rites 45)

In the last stanza, he says that he turned around to avoid his burning eyes. He sees him as a lonely girl who is beaten in a battle. The girl feels limp, bruised, tired and crushed. Her sensibility is shaped by the Indian environment and climate. The poet could not digest the poor living condition of the slum dwellers of Oriya.

The poet realises that this country's face is worn-out and that, life is shapeless and meaningless:

The worn out face of India  
Holds the weak eyes of dumb, solitary poets  
Who die alone,  
silenced by the shapelessness of life alive

((Shadow Space 26)

The only weapon, that a poet has are the words and he uses them to express a scathing indictment of the political and socio-economic system that brutalises more than half the population. Moved by the bloody history of the state of Orissa and the nation, Mahapatra has more to say about the immediate past and the present.

In a few poems, Mahapatra has shared his political ideas and his sympathies for the people with his readers. In "In an Old Country", he speaks about the socio—political reality:

Dead grandfathers lift their hands and watch.

They will not speak, politely silent, under protest.

All the wounds litter the sky or lie like craters  
high up in the mountain, like laughing children.

Looks can embarrass them, even delirious dreams.  
At times they cry out in their silence, calling upon  
Saints and gods, and they keep asking questions.  
Why do they go on asking Questions?



Anything is better than the strangled pain,  
the puttering around the garden's obese flowers,  
hands in the soft generous grass, curled  
like question marks. (Shadow Space 27)

In the poem "The abandoned British cemetery at Balasore", the poet beautifully contrasts the bloody colonial past with the death of thirty nine women including children who died because of recent cholera attack. When the poet happens to walk past the cemetery, he looks at the graves of Young Britishers as well as the graves of the women and small children who are all the victims to cholera. The names and the other details in the epitaphs are of no interest to the poet. But cholera has still been an unconquered agent causing the death of countless young people. Though the Britishers have left the country, it is still under the yoke of diseases like cholera. If the government had taken proper preventive measures, the death would have been avoided. He says:

A Hundred and fifty years ago  
I might have lived. And now nothing offends my ways  
A quietness of bramble and grass holds me to a weed  
Will it matter if I know who the victims were, Who  
survived?  
....  
Of what concern to me is a vanished empire?  
Or the conquest of my ancestors' timeless ennui?  
It is the dying young who have the power to show  
What the heart will hide, the grass shows no more  
...  
Who watches now in the dark near the dead wall  
The tribe of grass in the cracks of my eyes?  
It is Cholera still, death's sickly trickle,  
that plagues the sleepy shacks beyond this hump of  
earth,  
moving easily, swiftly, with quick power  
through both past and present  
this is the iron  
rusting in the vanquished country, the blood's unease  
...  
For the elaborate ceremonial of a coming generation  
To keep history awake, stifle the survivor's issuing  
cry...

(Poetry Down the ages 168)

Mahapatra gives voice to the Oriyan women in some of his poems. The poet feels that the male

centered society of Oriya does not believe in the emancipation of women. A woman has never been more than a sexual object in the eyes of chauvinistic men. They have been kept away from basic needs and fundamental rights, and their worlds have been confined to home and kitchen. They have been merely treated as an object of sensual satisfaction. Jayanta Mahapatra highlights the pathetic conditions of women in his poetry. The sense of presenting the realities of woman's life has always been sensible and significant. Mahapatra describes the cultural and spatial dispersal in the society. It means that there cannot be a singular cultural matrix in the cumulative tradition like that of Orissa. A sustained tradition, like that of Orissa, draws a quest inward to the individual. The resultant quest thus becomes fiercely responsive to its socio-cultural reality. Mahapatra uses the reality to shift the poetic quest inward. The plight of women is a part and parcel of his poetry and it occupies much of his theme. He delineates them in all shapes and figures.

It needs a lot of courage and broadmindedness to consider a prostitute woman as a part of the civic society. But Mahapatra gives them surpassing romantic identity. The prostitutes are always ostracised individuals, who cannot be a part of decent and cultural society. Writers tried to fight for their social space. His poem "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" seemed to deal with the pains and agonies that these prostitutes suffer in their everyday life while confronting the cultural society. Mahapatra has a great reverence and veneration for women who are primitive symbol of suffering and sacrifice. Mahapatra does not only write about these neglected women, but in general, he describes the condition of women who do not have a place to go. He uses a melancholic tone to give their thought a narration. Whether a wife, daughter, or a mother, the male dominated world has drawn the limits of existence for the women. The role of wife is enunciated with speculative irony. A woman can think of freedom only before marriage. The wife is alienated from the freedom that she enjoyed before marriage. The plight of ordinary women in their conventional and customary lives is pathetic. Mahapatra describes the position of Indian women with minute details:



Surrounded by the rough noose  
of ownership, to feel  
A sort of dutifulness  
in the quiet bait of blood;  
frightened, frail of paper  
like an origami crane in the wind.  
While the man says:  
it's the same story. The same one  
we've heard a thousand times.

(Rain of rites 17)

One can find the truth and authenticity in the description of women. He feels that women are sensitive sufferers of gender bias. They are neglected and marginalised at both cultural and biological levels. At one hand, their life is restricted to house and kitchen, to look after the children, husband and others; on the other hand they are only meant to quench the carnal crave of men. Basically, it is very painful that woman is compelled to be alone. She suffers from loneliness, not only a social one, but also an emotional loneliness. The poet succinctly sums up deploring and mute state of Indian women in the poem "Dawn":

There is a dawn which travels alone,  
Without the effort of creation, without puzzle.  
It stands simply, framed in the door, white in the air:  
Waiting for what the world will only let her do.

(Rain of Rites 1)

Mahapatra further presents women characters who struggle for their identity. They lead a meaningless and futile life. There is nothing but darkness all around them. The life is a living hell for them and they are bound to survive amidst sorrows and difficulties. "A missing Person" depicts such a tale of a missing woman. It is a portrait of a village woman. He describes the scene with the fine carved images:

In the darkened room  
a woman  
can not find her reflection in the mirror  
waiting as usual  
at the edge of sleep  
In her hands she holds  
the oil lamp  
whose drunken yellow flames  
know where her lonely body hides.

(Rain of rites 17)

Mahapatra's poem show him to be the avid fan and follower of Mahatma Gandhi's thought and ideology.

The poem "The Exile" explains Mahapatra's pre-occupation with the glorious past of India. The poet is aware of the heroic tradition of his Indian ancestors. He feels that he is totally cut off from them. He has nostalgia to be with them. The poet is surveying the decaying village. It refers to the remoteness of the place. The 'mouldy village' refers to the decaying village which has shabby looks and it is at the foot of the sun-burnt hills. The speaker assumes himself as an exile standing among the ruins of an Indian village. The poet is between the two worlds; the poet's English speaking world and his native people. Writing poetry holds a special attraction for him. At the same time, he is also intimately involved with his native people and he wants to write about them. The commitment of the poet continues to be mixed. The village is charred by the excessive heat of the sun and nothing can remain there except the stone. The stone is a mute spectator to the experience of the multitudes of generations and silently participates in the creative and destructive cycles of time. As the stone becomes a mute witness, the poet too accepts his position as a victim to the destroying flow of time and the evolving generations.

Mahapatra feels that there is a sharp contrast between the past and the present. He could find an overwhelming decline in the values of life. The poet feels intoxicated because he is fully lost in thought. The poet is afraid to close the door of past and proceed with the future since he does not know what is in reserve for him. The poet feels sad that he is an exile. It seems to him that he does not belong to any place, and that no place is willing to own him. 'Between good and evil' he finds himself torn between experiences of good and evil, which pull him in opposite directions. The phrase, 'A country's ghost pull my eyes towards birth' indicates that he has not lost hope in life since the memories of his past create in him an urge to continue living. There is a need for a pilgrimage to the Indian past in order to recognise the present and lead a meaningful life. When one reads the line, 'It is there in my son's eyes up the tree', the speaker hopes to continue



performing his meaningless or insignificant duties and foolish actions; in the hope of entering his father's house; 'Father' may stand for God. The speaker's present duty is discernible in his son's eyes; the poet hopes that the new generation will be guided in the new path and have a new start.

Mahapatra's poems are known for their melancholic tone. The last line of this poem seems to give a clue for the reason for his meditative mood. Interwoven with a stream of romanticism, his poem celebrates a longing for the native land and memories of the good old days gone by. Under the clouds of melancholy, there seems to be the rain of hope and faith. Ever-moving hand of time can do the miracle.

Jayanta Mahapatra is concerned with contemporary situations prevalent in India and day-to-day problems encountered by common native people. He has raised contemporary issues in the poems named "The Lost Children of America." He compares the corrupt politicians with whores. He exposes thus:

Here in the dusty malarial lanes  
of Cuttack where years have slowly lost their secrets  
they wander  
In these lanes nicked by intrigue and rain(...)  
In the crowded market square among rotting  
tomatoes  
Fish-scales and the moist warm odour of bananas  
and piss  
Passing by the big-breasted, hard-eyed young  
whores  
Who frequent the empty silent space behind the  
local cinema  
by the town hall where corrupt politicians still  
on delivering their pre-election speeches.(...)  
In the Hanuman Temple last night  
the priest's pomaded jean-clad son  
raped squint-eyed fourteen-year fisher girl  
on the cracked stone platform behind the  
shrine  
and this morning  
her father found her at the police station  
assaulted over and over again by four  
policemen  
dripping of darkness and of scarlet death.

(The Poetry of Jayanta 225)

Mahapatra has made an ironical comment on the functioning of the government machinery and police administration. One and only cause of prostitution is poverty and this profession can be uprooted by eliminating poverty, by implementing rehabilitation programs, by providing free food and education to their children and by employing them on some jobs. In spite of taking such measures and initiatives, the government issues license to the women indulging in the flesh-trading and that further aggravates their wounds. Police nabs and persecute those prostitutes who are not in the possession of license and to get rid of police, they envisage different lame excuses as a young boy does to escape evil acts from his parents. Moreover, the only source of income and livelihood for prostitutes are their flesh and skin, and with the rolling of the days, weeks, months and years, their charms and appearance get faded and they keep on losing customers. So, to hide their age and looks, they go in the shelter of cosmetic illusion. Mahapatra writes in "The Twenty-fifth Anniversary":

The prostitutes are younger this year:  
At the police station they're careless to give  
reasons  
For being what they are  
And the older women careful enough not to  
show their years

(Poetry of Jayanta 44)

The Indian culture and tradition rely mainly on old myth and superstition. From ages, the men have been dominant over women. The men have framed a set of filthy rules and rituals keeping in mind their own comfort, convenience and immoral life style at the cost of torment and exploitation of the latter. It is a sheer injustice that a widow cannot remarry. She cannot wear nice clothes, but a widow should dress only in white. Widower fulfils his all wishes and desires unabatedly but on widow, a shackle of culture and convention is unleashed to bear bleak and barren life.

As a native speaker, far from grudging, Jayanta Mahapatra finally emerges as a poet of human conditions and grows into one of the finest contemporary Indo-Anglican poets. Mahapatra is a poet of quiet but ironic reflection of life's bitter-sweet memories, happenings and revelations.



Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic world is filled with various images of wives, beloveds, whores, seductresses, village women, city women and adolescent girls, having deeply significant metaphoric evocations and spotlighting his tragic vision of life to which he is essentially committed. Demonstrating his vital poetic strategy and dimensionalising his deep humanism as well as his overriding thematic obsessions.

Mahapatra has a great reverence and veneration for women, who are ancient symbols of suffering and sacrifice. He also confides in mythical saying, "Wherever Women are revered, Gods dwell there." He views:

Our minds were tied to the myths  
That womanhood was pure, one  
With the repose of the gods (Temple 12)

But at the same time, he is profoundly perplexed about the perennial problem pertaining to women. In the typical modernist vein, Mahapatra depicts the contemporary life with rare vividness of imagination and evokes the myth of the land in his poems. In the poem "Temple", he depicts the story of a young dark woman, Chelammal who represents the collective—Psyche of women. Temple is divided into three sections. They are The Hall of dancing, The Hall of offerings and "Sanctum sanctorum: The Shrine". Mahapatra questions earnestly:

What makes the dance of unreason go on?  
What bones kill the peace  
that flesh seeks?  
What plucks the words from the epics?

(Temple 36)

In the Hall of Dancing, the girls' youth is portrayed. The poet beautifully portrays the excitement and restlessness that comes with the onset of puberty and adolescence that follows and the untamed life-energies together create a world of wilderness. He writes:

Around the kingdom of Opals she wandered  
Making her need be led the words of her  
myth  
Crossing world upon world, breaking vision  
upon vision  
Moving about in circles of timeless power  
... .. (Temple 36)

Women cannot have secrets to spare. When she gets matured, it is known to everyone. The people at home invite the relatives and neighbours and celebrate it in a grand manner. Mahapatra's astonishment appears in this way:

Two aunts, a distant cousin  
like a ghost of her disapproving mother,  
their genial grins as though redeemed  
by unchanging village ways  
mouths scarlet with paan juice,  
they recite tales  
to the glowing limbs of Chelammal (Temple

18-19)

In "The Hall of offerings", Mahapatra describes the second stage in the life of Chellammal. She represents Indian women who do not have any identity in the world of men. Legally, she cannot claim anything of her own. She is always alone and her life is secluded:

There is no woman  
Who is not alone,  
No woman who is sure  
She has found her way  
To her real purpose in life (Temple 32)

In the third section, the legend of Putna is effectively used. Mahapatra's poetry skillfully demonstrates the woes of women. It incorporates various vice and virtues associated with them. He comes out with a solution for the pain and predicament that they confront. He makes use of the legend of Ogress Putna for this very purpose. Afraid of prophecy of being killed by God Krishna, the mammoth monster Kansa sends the Ogress Putna to assassinate the incarnated child Krishna. She transformed herself into a beautiful and motherly figure. She smeared venom on her breasts and offered milk to the child. The child Krishna sucked her milk and life too. According to the myth, Ogress Putna reached 'Moksha' or salvation by being killed in the hands of God Krishna because she offered two things simultaneously: evil and good; hemlock and nectar; venom and milk. She is punished with death for her evil role and she attains her salvation for the role of mother.

The poet wants to justify that like Putna, the women can also keep their sufferings at distance only by their own deeds i.e. their redemption solely



depend on womanhood. Otherwise they will be ever suffering at the hands of chauvinistic men. As a poet, he tries to break the iron chains that have been tied around the women restricting their movements by the orthodox patriarchal society.

And now the ogress  
transformed into a lovely woman  
her poisoned nipples  
the moksha-centre of her own martyrdo..  
So here, there on the bloodied ground  
  
In the greed of her mystic caste  
writhing under the disastrous stroke of  
her fate  
she stoppd, miraculously revealed:  
svelte and slender, mysterious in  
venomous virue,  
the weopon of youth flashing again, lifted  
blade  
more terrible than the agonized mask of  
shakthi  
yet feeling the thirst that cauterized her  
insides  
her melancholy breasts stretching their  
shadows  
cross the sacred hours of ashes and dust  
(Temple 48-49)

The young Chelammal is raped and she is drowned in the river. Through the girl, Mahapatra portrays the lack-lustre life of Indian women. He feels sad that the world has become powerless silent spectators of the pitiable plight of women. Chelammal, the drowned girl, the woman who as raped both individually and collectively represent the symbol of human suffering.

The poet is a conscious observer of society, of tradition, custom, and of changing human behavior in a fragmented world. He projects the consequences of globalisation, consumerism, science and philosophy on the values of the Indian society. Apart from the western influences, Indian political system and caste as well as class discrimination have laid a crucial impact on the social construct initiating a search for identity. In his poems, there is a prevailing note of irony and melancholy. Mahapatra portrays the facts related to sacred soil of Orissa, the reality is that he perceives around society. But his observation does not confine only to Orissa. His

poetry represents the changing perspectives of modern Indian society. His poetry provides a precise concept of the psychology of modern man who emphasises more on the westernisation than on traditional values of his own. He juxtaposes tradition and modernity and thereby demonstrates a contrasting picture of squalid civilisation. As a native of Orissa, he is definitely influenced by the myth, legends, painting and the sculpture of Orissa.

Mahapatra symbolically represents the issues of social inequalities and the related problems by tracing three different classes: the rich, middle and the poor class. The boy in the poem represents the helpless poor class who is at the bottom of hierarchy. He has to tolerate all the ills of society. The poet throws light on the problem created by capitalist class and its evil impact on middle class and poor class of society. Here, the poet speaks about the clash of these three classes and their ideologies. But he deals with this controversial issue in an objective manner. Mahapatra's soul seems to be resting in the common people, both in urban and rural areas. Rural innocence is in sharp contrast with the urban complexity. The poem 'Winter in the City' portrays the money-oriented city life as well as the split Indian social structure. Mahapatra's portrayal of this sick society is well focused in the following lines of the poem 'Grass.'

It is just a mirror  
marching away solemnly with me, luring  
into an ancestral smell of rot, reminding me  
of secretes of my own: (Anthology 45)

Thus, the poet explores their commitment towards their society by revealing the erosion of glorious values of Orissa, and creating awareness among the Oriyans of their prestigious past and self purification by recreating it. In each and every poem of Jayanta Mahapatra, there is an ironical, satirical and melancholic overtone by which he has focused on the reality of society and individual.

Mahapatra presents his consciousness endlessly suffering the transience of life in the poem "Needs":

The World that gradually spreads like fire  
Under my needs  
Has struck the sky's stars.  
I am marked by the slow venom of need



Is an ancient law only to be obeyed?  
 in the cramped mind where memory  
 Puts its mysterious hand  
 And gropes between the past and the  
 present?  
 The poet presumes that the God is Yama,  
 No Man points to the sky  
 Without being aware of the desire to live  
 In his belly, where the earth-snake sleeps.  
 Dark and Plain time god of freedom and  
 death,

What can make you so sacred?  
 Which are those needs I can finally reject?  
 What does the starlight in the gaping  
 distance  
 Know of its resoundings on the sleepless  
 leaves? (Life Signs 45)

By posing a series of questions, the poet expresses his dilemma: to select between the customary human desires and the dharma preached by Lord Krishna in 'The Bhagavath Gita.' He finds it difficult to balance between the needs of the present world and the renunciation suggested by Hindu Dharma to reach Moksha. The universe is common to everyone. The poet feels that every human being is making child-like attempt to reach God with a life lived to meet their desires. Another poem in the same volume "In the fields of Desolute Rice" concludes the volume thus:

Falsely by the blessed rice I stand,  
 Staring at the valley of bones.  
 If a sorrow survives me,  
 It only blackens the silhouettes of other men.  
 It is not simple to share love  
 With those, who live in us.  
 And not enough to stand with darkness.  
 In the end  
 I come back to the day and to the rain.

(Life Signs 45)

This blemished world is painful to Mahapatra. He tries to define himself in the context of it. But he confronts the brutal past and the sense of isolation haunts his mind again. Further, the sense of isolation makes him aware that these ruined stones are the real essence of his origin. Mahapatra says that his existence is inseparable from the roots

of the past. He agrees that his life-force is shaped by culture, tradition, myths and symbols of past.

On reading the poem, the reader may be confused with his belief in Hindu rituals as he is a Christian. He is a converted Christian but the rituals of Hindu culture, no doubt, have made a deep impression on his mind. His rationalistic mind may reject the Hindu God and rituals. He finds that myths are unbelievable and, at the same time, he cannot but take pride in it. The search for "Who am I?" is complete after many confrontations and questions. Hence in 'Relationship', the sense of alienation and the sense of rootedness develop side by side. One can find that the influence of the dual culture on him. This kind of bi-culturalism shapes his consciousness.

Now caught in the currents of time  
 I watch the blue of the sky  
 Seep out slowly,  
 hear the voices of old waves drift into  
 silence,  
 and yet my existence lies in the stones  
 which carry my footsteps from one day into  
 another,  
 down to the infinite distances, the dense  
 jungles  
 where tigers' eyes are glowing red  
 like virulent boils of pox on dead women  
 and children,  
 and where the grotesque dawn of  
 wilderness wood  
 becomes a conceiver of life, nothing else,  
 as I continue walking back and forth  
 not knowing whether the earth  
 world let me find finally its mouth;...

(Relationship 22)

Mahapatra himself confesses, "It is a painful process, writing a poem after poem towards self-discovery... to find out who the stranger Jayanta Mahapatra is—that's what I'm trying to find out probably as I go on from poem to poem. But it's the outside world that chooses me, that makes me go into myself." (Indian literary review 54)

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry celebrates the essence of an Indian sensibility moulded by a reckless innocence, and a sensibility so beautifully, attached to the belief that the present is the continuation of the past and nothing can change the entire sequence



of things in the midst of temples with their rituals. Orissa has not only been a native town for him but, it is his everything. Jayanta Mahapatra's sharp eyes cannot leave any aspect of Orissa; the temples in ruins, priests behaving like crows, lepers clotting at the gate of the Konarka, widows standing outside the temple in a queue for "darshan" of the deity, rearing of the cows, the great car festival in Puri, the unpleasant effects of the Kalinga carved on the stones, beggars going from door to door became the objective correlative of his poetry.

His verse is free and it is not controlled by any structured pattern. His poems are always reflective and there is a complete absence of any incident of dramatic interest. Two types of rhythms are noticeable in his poems. Some of the poems have tightly organised pattern and some have loose pattern. Mahapatra cannot be called a Whitman nor he is a poet representing the country. Mahapatra tries to create "a body of poetry which has the kind of relationship with his environment and the problem finding significance in 'this time of darkness and lost ones' that is similar to the Major poets of our age". (Twenty-five Indian Poets in English 182). He is an intensely subjective poet, and fiercely an honest poet. In his use of language, he is sometimes peculiar and therefore a difficult poet to comprehend. This peculiarity is also an aspect of his ingenuously honest search into self. Mahapatra's poetry advances in his skilful execution of myth, images and symbols. Bruce King records his remarks thus:

While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire and moments of renewal his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary life of people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. The poems are varied attempts to bridge an epistemological, phenomenological gap to know, be part of enclose, experience. (Bruce 7)

Jayanta Mahapatra did not believe in any rigorous metrical device, or in any regular stanza form, or in any rhyming scheme. He recorded his personal experiences with the world and kept his findings very honestly through imagery, symbols and myths. He believed in the glorious past of India and

tried to create awareness about the same through his poetry. He did always try to go into roots of Indian culture and tradition where real India lies. He did not have any obsession of any native cultural preoccupation despite the fact that the background of his poems is Cuttack, Puri and Bhubaneswar.

Mahapatra has developed a genuine voice which is of great interest to diverse Indian and foreign audiences. In an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi, he says, "I wrote because I wanted to. I have not studied literature or poetry. I am ignorant of schools of poetry I don't know if I should belong to a 'school'. I belong to my own experience, and my feelings (Sarangi 38). As he rightly says, he belongs to his experience with the world. He identifies himself with his roots and realises the meaninglessness in the life of the modern man. He exorbitantly describes his alienation, suffering, his frustration due to his old age and the unavoidable triumph of time over him. He convincingly and honestly voices forth the social, religious and political issues in Mahapatra's India in the fine form of poetry. Though he sometimes is absorbed with "his self," the people and the recurring problems of existence in the Indian space becomes the dominant theme of his poetry. By and large, he gives his voice for the deprived, and he is undoubtedly the poet for the people.

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